



MEETING SYNOPSIS

August 11, 2021

The following is a summary of the fourth meeting of the Elevate Advisory Council Connectivity Subcommittee. The attendance sheet follows this summary. The agenda and other meeting materials can be found on the website under Advisory Council > Meetings.

Project Updates

Brendan Moore (City of Tuscaloosa) provided updates about ongoing projects.

The Tuscaloosa National Airport runway reconstruction was completed ahead of schedule and under budget. Dave Pass (subcommittee member) added that the project was built as environmentally sustainably as possible, and was fully funded by federal grants. Under federal regulations, leftover grant funds cannot be repurposed to other airport projects. The recent airport master plan open house event was extremely well attended. In the future, the airport terminal discussion and this subcommittee's feedback about it will be very important.

The Northern Riverwalk should be complete around November and a ribbon-cutting will be held. Record rainfall has caused project delays. The parking lot, curbs, pavilion, and grand lawn areas are all well underway. Overall, the project is around 40 percent complete.

Early work is underway on the Western Riverwalk, including environmental assessments, preliminary design, and coordination efforts. Updates will continue as they become available.

Tuscaloosa Transit Study

Mr. Moore introduced Kimley-Horn, the professional consulting firm responsible for the development of the transit study. Project managers who presented included Jessica Choi, AICP, and Chelsey Hendrickson, AICP. A copy of their presentation follows this synopsis.

Ms. Choi noted that this transit study is the first of its kind for Tuscaloosa. The plan recommendations take two forms. The first set of recommendations assumes Tuscaloosa County Parking and Transit Authority's (PATA) current funding will remain level over the next five years. This category includes changes that can improve services and operations. The second set of recommendations recognizes that additional local funding is required for implementation. This category identifies opportunities to expand services and ridership.

Ms. Choi highlighted a couple of PATA's key performance indicators in her presentation but noted that the full Existing Services report, which will be included in the final study document as an appendix, will expound at length upon each of the different indicators listed in her slides. Route-by-route, Kimley-Horn analyzed passengers per revenue mile,



which indicates an average number of passengers riding each route as it travels one mile. This metric accounts for both how long each route is and how many riders use each route. In addition, Ms. Choi discussed the cost per trip. This metric takes into account the number of trips and the cost to operate each route, on average. The Shelton State Community College route stands out among PATA's current routes due to the greater length (in miles) of the route.

The next item discussed was the Transit Market Analysis. Car ownership data can illuminate geographic areas where more households may need an alternative type of transportation, such as public transit. Mr. Pass asked if the areas shown are exclusively residential areas. Ms. Choi explained that they are not; the map is based upon census blocks. However, the underlying data indicate percentages of residential households without vehicles.

Understanding workforce patterns and traits is a critical part of public transit analysis. Tuscaloosa is a regional employment center. Average commuting time for this area is around 20 minutes, which is a relatively short period. The analysis in the presentation reflects data within the corporate limits of the City of Tuscaloosa. Tuscaloosa residents work in areas of concentration in Downtown Tuscaloosa, along US Highway 82, and the Skyland Boulevard corridor. Employees who work within Tuscaloosa city limits travel from all over the general area and throughout Tuscaloosa County to arrive at work each day.

Public engagement during the transit study was robust, in spite of adaptations required due to the pandemic. Rather than engaging in large group public settings, online and targeted in-person engagement were necessary. A full list of groups and organizations that provided input, along with their feedback, will be included in an appendix of the final study document.

Several budget-neutral recommendations are included in the transit study. More direct routes would help riders better understand where each route generally travels. This is achieved by having routes focus more on main travel corridors than on winding, neighborhood roads. Introducing bidirectional service would eliminate the need for a passenger to travel significantly away from their ultimate destination in order to arrive there later in the route.

Ms. Hendrickson discussed the following budget-neutral proposed changes to each route:

For Route 1 (Holt/Alberta), the service works well today, but there are options available if additional funding becomes available.

Route 2 (McKenzie Court/Stillman College) is not proposed to change unless new funding becomes available. The existing design of the route and its stops acknowledges the fact that getting pedestrians safely to bus stops is a challenge in the area, primarily due to a lack of sidewalks. The current route makes many stops and takes a winding path through



West Tuscaloosa in order to serve residents who cannot easily walk to a bus stop. There are opportunities to simplify the route, while also layering in new services and amenities to help passengers arrive safely at bus stops. With greater funding, a more direct route could extend all the way to Skyland Boulevard in the east, allowing West Tuscaloosa passengers to avoid traveling to the downtown Intermodal Facility in order to access Skyland.

Route 3 (Hargrove Road) is proposed to be a new bidirectional route designed to serve major corridors – Greensboro Avenue, Hargrove Road, and the east end of Skyland Boulevard. The new route also introduces a transfer opportunity to Route 7, which serves the rest of Skyland Boulevard and several other major commercial corridors in Tuscaloosa.

Route 4 (Medical/VA Route) as proposed would offer bidirectional service and would similarly focus on major roadways – Bryant Drive, McFarland Boulevard, and Veterans Memorial Parkway. From Kicker Road to the east, the route does not stop again until arriving at the VA Medical Center. The redesigned route also offers a transfer opportunity to the University of Alabama Shuttle (Route 6).

Route 5 (Shelton State) currently travels a very long, looped path. The proposed update would change it to a bidirectional route that would help passengers get to and from their destinations more quickly and conveniently.

Route 6 (University of Alabama Shuttle) is not proposed to change but would offer a new transfer opportunity to Route 4 (Medical/VA).

Route 7 (Skyland Blvd/10th Avenue/McFarland Blvd) is proposed to focus on serving 15th Street, McFarland Boulevard, James I. Harrison Parkway, Skyland Boulevard, the south end of Greensboro Avenue, and 10th Avenue. A transfer opportunity to Route 3 (Hargrove Road) also exists along Skyland. With additional funding, this route could be split into two bidirectional routes that would also offer a transfer opportunity between each other.

Ms. Hendrickson also discussed the capital improvement and financial plans for PATA. This aspect of the transit study examines existing capital assets and projects into the future the replacement needs and their timing. It also looks at funding that is available and projects over the next five years how it will be used. Mr. Moore noted that the City of Tuscaloosa currently is the only agency that funds PATA, in spite of PATA being able to serve an urbanized area that expands well beyond the city limits. Recommendations that extend service beyond City of Tuscaloosa limits will need to consider funding partnerships with other agencies in order to implement them.

Kimley-Horn also reviewed PATA's current fare charges and researched other communities in order to make recommendations for improving the fare structure. Because of this review, PATA has already eliminated the fee charged for transfers between routes. Russell Lawrence (subcommittee member and Director of PATA) noted that this change has had a very positive impact on operations. Since the change, the buses do not struggle as much to



stay on time. Discounting bulk pass purchases incentivizes passengers to buy more fares, eases the passenger experience, and reduces PATA staff time to process a greater number of one-time only fares. Passes could also be sold at other locations in the community to make purchases more convenient for passengers.

Ms. Hendrickson presented a variety of other improvements that will require additional local funding in order to implement. In the final plan document, these ideas will be roughly categorized into levels of priority, from high to low.

Although PATA already offers a mobile application to smartphone users, feedback indicates that a lot of passengers and potential passengers are not aware of the app or the information available in it. Marketing/promoting the app and educating riders about it are recommended. In addition, bus stops need to be improved with information about travel times, the different routes that will stop there, and where each route travels. Other requested amenities at stops included benches, shelters, and lighting.

Pedestrian access to bus stops is critical in any public transit system and many improvements are needed to provide a more thorough network of sidewalks and crosswalks between stops and from points of origin to stops.

Numerous stakeholders and members of the public requested different operating hours during the engagement process. These requests included extending hours later on weekdays, but also providing service more frequently than once per hour. These requests will assist more people with getting to and from employment opportunities.

A new opportunity to improve service in West Tuscaloosa is to provide a microtransit service, along with a more direct and simpler fixed bus route. Microtransit would establish a geographic zone in which public transit vehicles operate on-demand. The service aims not only to serve passengers traveling to and from points inside the zone, but also to connect them with other fixed routes outside the zone. For example, based on a submitted passenger request, a vehicle could pick up a rider or riders at any point of origin within the zone and drop them off either at their ultimate destination (if inside the zone) or at the closest fixed route bus stop (so that they could transfer to a different route outside the zone). In areas where pedestrian amenities, such as sidewalks, are in short supply, this service could greatly supplement fixed route transit service. The local transit agency can update microtransit zones at will, with very few bureaucratic processes involved. This flexibility makes them a very appealing choice. Other locations that could benefit from microtransit include the area south of Skyland Boulevard and the Holt/Alberta area.

A new rapid downtown route could be added to PATA's service. In the public survey, respondents expressed interest in this opportunity, and indicated a willingness to wait 10 to 15 minutes on the bus within this area. Kimley-Horn recommends using a smaller vehicle with a different bus wrap (design) that distinguishes the service from PATA's regular fixed route service. The first phase of this route could serve the general area between



downtown Tuscaloosa and the University of Alabama campus, with a westward expansion in a future phase as development continues to expand west of downtown.

Ms. Hendrickson discussed another workforce transit opportunity known as a vanpool. These services work well with a variety of shift schedules. Employees who live near each other can use such a service to share a vehicle to get to work in a very flexible way. Passengers do contribute financially, but the fees charged can generally be lower than each passenger would pay to have individual transportation to work. This service provides opportunities for public-private partnerships with employers and other stakeholders. Another benefit is that vanpools can be used to test markets in order to gauge passenger demand. Linda Parsons (subcommittee member) asked if this type of service could travel as far as Birmingham. Kimley-Horn responded that this is possible.

Mr. Pass asked how the Tuscaloosa transit system could be added to Google Maps and other map developers as a transportation option. Kimley-Horn responded that PATA can provide route information to these developers, but a key consideration is to provide timely updates when routes or stops change.

Mr. Pass also asked if PATA might charge a higher fare during peak travel times, to help offset operating costs. He cited University of Alabama football game days as an example. Dr. Parsons echoed the question later, asking if residents outside the City of Tuscaloosa could be charged more to use the service since there are no agencies outside the city that contribute financially to PATA. Kimley-Horn responded that the Federal Transit Agency prohibits this. Public transit agencies cannot charge different fares to different classes of passengers (such as one-time game day riders versus daily workforce passengers or City of Tuscaloosa residents versus City of Northport residents).

Dr. Parsons asked about advertising on transit buses. Mr. Lawrence responded that PATA already receives advertising revenue for ads inside the buses. She also asked if Kimley-Horn projected how much ridership could increase in the future with these recommendations. They responded that such projections fell outside the scope of their work for this study.

The group in attendance generally expressed consensus that PATA offers a service with regional benefits that extend far beyond City of Tuscaloosa limits. As a result, regional funding of PATA is desirable and would be advantageous in expanding services and ridership. In addition, grant opportunities should be actively explored.

Next Steps

The final transit study document will be distributed to the Advisory Council and posted on the Elevate website when it is finalized in the near future.